**Introduction to Accessibility and Disability Rights:**

* Accessibility is a human right. Every person should be able to experience museums, galleries, and art regardless of impairment or disability. It is our job, regardless of our department or role, to ensure that every visitor and employee at the Hirshhorn can fully engage with the museum campus, our collections, exhibitions, and public programs. Inclusivity is why we are gathered here today!
* The birth of the modern disability rights movement began in the 1960s, though struggles for disability rights, access, and inclusion have been long fought for centuries. A majority of the events highlighted today demonstrate the power of working together to incite change. People with disabilities, across age, race, class, gender, sexuality, and impairment worked together on collective actions to demand equality, access, employment, healthcare, respect, and inclusion.
* The first pension law in the United States was passed in August 1776, following the Revolutionary War. It was put in place to offer financial support to those who were injured and disabled in battle defending the US.
* Throughout the 19th and early 20th century there were numerous discriminatory laws and policies in place to keep people with physical and mental disabilities off of the streets, out of the public view, and often institutionalized.
* Following WWI and WWII, there was an influx of soldiers returning from the warfront with various disabilities, often relegated to recover based on their impairments. Out of these recovery centers, people organized and began to advocate for support upon reentry, including rehabilitation and employment opportunities.
* In 1935 the League of the Physically Handicapped formed in New York to protest discrimination by the Works Progress Administration (WPA). They held successful demonstrations, including sit-ins at the Home Relief Bureau and the WPA offices, ultimately resulting in the creation of 1,500 jobs for people with disabilities in NYC.
* In 1940, the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) was founded by forming organizations for the blind from seven different states. The thinking around combining efforts across disparate organizations was strength numbers, making it easier to advocate for rights through collective action. The NFB is the oldest and largest organization led by people with blindness in the United States.
* In 1962, Ed Roberts sued the University of California Berkeley to gain admission, making him the first person with severe disabilities to attend the school. His admission paved the way for other students with severe disabilities, and while there, they banded together to found the Rolling Quads – a student advocacy group that fought for better housing, treatment, and recognition on the campus. Through his engagement with disability rights, and the collective actions around access and equity, the Center for Independent Living was founded at Berkeley in 1972.
* Following various sit-ins, protests, and letter campaigns, the Rehabilitation Act was passed in 1973, prohibiting discrimination against people with disabilities by agencies receiving Federal funding.
* Throughout the 1980s, there were countless protests across the United States including actions and grassroots campaigns to make public transportation accessible, expand education reform to include children with disabilities, the expansion of accessible housing, and the continued fight to put an end to discrimination in housing and employment – to name a few.
* In 1990 the Americans with Disabilities Acts (ADA) was signed into law, providing comprehensive civil rights protections for people with disabilities. One big outcome is that accommodations must be provided for business employing 15 or more people, and “that public accommodations and commercial facilities make ‘reasonable modifications’ to ensure access for disabled members of the public.”
	+ Title III of the ADA defines museums and galleries as public places and therefore must be accessible
	+ Vague language has been interpreted narrowly, but was intended to reflect the wide range of disabilities that exist
* 2000s to today - continued protests for equity, healthcare, inclusion, and representation

**Hirshhorn Accessibility Initiatives:**

* Accessibility Task Force founded in 2016.
* We first led a verbal description and touch tour in December of 2016, which was created in response to a request through the Smithsonian’s Office of Accessibility.
* In early 2017, a group of individuals across departments banded together to learn to write verbal description to make the Hirshhorn’s newly launching audio guide (Art Surrounds) accessible to visitors with vision impairment and blindness.
* During the run of our Yayoi Kusama exhibition in 2017, and in response to a lack of accessibility for those using wheelchairs, the museum created virtual reality accommodations for three of our six Infinity Mirror Rooms. We also launched an experimental touch tour for the exhibition and began offering our first tours with American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation.
* Later that year, we began offering transcripts for our sound-based works with our exhibition *Ilya and Emilia Kabakov: The Utopian Projects*. Every exhibition since has included transcripts for all audio-based work.
* We have also launched Storytime in ASL and Storytime in Spanish, as well as stroller tours for young audiences.
* In 2018 we collaborated with the Smithsonian Office of Accessibility to launch our first Morning at the Museum program to offer sensory-friendly museum experiences to families with children with sensory processing disorders.
* Looking ahead to the future, we are working on creating an accessibility plan including an accessibility brochure for forthcoming exhibitions, complete with visual description, Alt Text, and descriptions of narrative and musical-audio experiences. The brochure will be printed in Braille, as well as made available on our website and compatible with a screen reader. Additionally, we are launching our Visual Description Project to generate Alt Text and long description for the museum’s online offerings.
* This is a grassroots effort!

**Helpful Definitions:**

Accommodations / adaptations for the web include: magnification, color / contrast, font, text size, font color, voice dictation, screen readers. The key is to create a flexible and adaptable website that can be adapted for the use of visitors with a range of needs.

* Image description: Text based description of an image in either Alt Text or Long Description format. It is added to the website and compatible with screen readers.
* Verbal description: Spoken-word description used to describe live performances, tours, public programs, or video. Verbal description could be applied to video art, too.
* Alt (alternative) Text: Brief sentence fragment of visual description. 15 words or less. Only use a period at the end of the text if it’s a complete sentence.
* Long Description: More detailed description. Can be a few sentences to a couple of paragraphs long. The sentences should be complete, rather than fragments. The length of the long description is determined by the complexity of the image or object.

We will be writing both Alt Text and Long Descriptions for each image. These two options give the user agency, as they are able to choose how much detail they want. I equate this with choosing how long to look at an artwork in a gallery or image on a website.

**How to describe an image:**

1. Summarize the image. Start with the subject, **what is it**? This first description will result in your Alt Text (15 words or less).
	1. If you’re feeling stuck or having a hard time starting, do a quick writing exercise. First look closely and write down all of the nouns that you see in the work or image, take two minutes for this. Next write down all of the adjectives, fragmented thoughts, mood, or feeling this image or work evokes, take two minutes for this. Cull through your word lists to begin writing the Alt Text.
2. Reiterate the Alt Text. Then begin to offer description of details in the image, **how is it**? As in, how is it the way it is? What does it look like, in detail? Include form, color, spatial orientation, text (if applicable), to provide further context. The length of your Long Description will be informed by the complexity of the image or object.
	1. Use simple sentence construction.
	2. Remember, subjectivity is part of this process, you see what you see. It might be different from how someone else interprets the image. Word choice and metaphor will come into play here.
	3. We will likely have multiple people describe the same image, then combine their texts into a single description. This should help with the issue of subjectivity.
	4. Remember, this might be read through a screen reader. Try to avoid long run-on sentences for clarity of understanding.
3. Share with the Image Description team, for review and edits.

**Things to consider when writing visual description:**

* Subject matter (what is it?)
* The length of text (Alt Text vs. Long Description)
* Simplified sentence construction
* Word choice – no jargon. Define art and art history terms.
* Color – stick to primary and secondary colors if possible, define or describe more complex colors.
* Consider and name the direction or spatial orientation you are describing, i.e. top to bottom, left to right. Orienting the user is helpful in their understanding of the image. Describe from the perspective of the viewer.
	+ Foreground and background are also part of the orientation (in a painting, drawing, work on paper, or photograph).
* Use inclusive language